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ABSTRACT

A team of field researchers studied exemplary language arts teachers in Dade County, Florida (a high school that is 99% minority, but with strong administrative support from the Dade County's Division of Language Arts/Reading) and examined the contexts that lead to thought-provoking learning in English classes and the professional contexts that support such learning. The Division of Language Arts/Reading is a group of administrators (all former teachers) who focus their main attention on teacher training and curriculum development. Keeping closely connected to real classroom practice and constant support and respect for the classroom teacher is the philosophy that underpins what happens in the division. Staying on the cutting edge of language arts is exemplified by attending local, state, and national conferences, and participating in professional organizations. Staff development and curriculum materials are developed and delivered with organization and structure. Bringing in experienced, talented teachers, and actively involving them in the curriculum development process makes the curriculum more realistic and also provides a rich resource from which the Division can draw when the need arises to replace a supervisor, or add new positions. (Contains a questionnaire and a list of reports and case studies that came out of this project.) (SC)

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CELA RESEARCH REPORT

BEATING THE ODDS OVER TIME: ONE DISTRICT'S PERSPECTIVE

SALLIE SNYDER
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Dade County Schools Division of Language Arts/Reading

CELA REPORT NUMBER 12004

NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTER ON

ENGLISH LEARNING & ACHIEVEMENT

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To the outstanding teachers I have known throughout my career whose work has enriched my own teaching as well as my life, I say thank you for all that you do.

To the eight exceptionally fine teachers who were part of this study, I say thank you and want to tell you again that I am in awe of the remarkable things you do each day with your students.

To my colleagues in the Division of Language Arts/Readinug whose intellect, wisdom, and passion led me beyond anywhere that I could have gone alone, I express my boundless gratitude.

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The Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA) is a national research and development center located at the University at Albany, State University of New York, in collaboration with the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Additional research is conducted at the Universities of Georgia and Washington.

The Center, established in 1987, initially focused on the teaching and learning of literature. In March 1996, the Center expanded its focus to include the teaching and learning of English, both as a subject in its own right and as it is learned in other content areas. CELA's work is sponsored by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education, as part of the National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment.

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9906-12004

FOREWORD

The district you will catch a glimpse of in this article is a very special place. Middle and high school students in its most challenging neighborhoods are actively involved in becoming highly literate; they are learning how language works in context and how to use it to advantage for specific purposes. And its teachers are supported in their efforts to improve their teaching and to grow as professionals.

What makes this kind of environment possible? A team of field researchers and I have been exploring this question in a major five-year project for the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA). This paper is one part of that project, which involves 48 other classrooms in 24 English programs, nationwide. Each is providing English instruction to middle and high school students. Most are exemplary; some are more typical and give us points of contrast. Our study examines the contexts that lead to thought- provoking learning in English classes and the professional contexts that support such learning.

Those of us involved in the study sensed we had tapped a gold mine when we began interviewing and studying exemplary language arts teachers in Dade County, Florida. The teachers were indeed outstanding and were helping their students, most of whom are minorities in poor, urban areas, perform better than similar students in other districts. In addition, we heard over and over again from the teachers about the substantial support they received from Dade County's Division of Language Arts/Reading. They talked about their contacts with the division in glowing terms, calling the staff "educational giants," "role models," "fairy godmothers," "my vitamin B shots." One veteran teacher told us that the district staff: "consistently presents meaningful and stimulating inservice on a wide variety of subjects, from improving test scores to the latest techniques for improving reading, to portfolio preparation." Another said that "All my writing instruction techniques came from what I learned in district workshops either directly from one of the language arts supervisors or from a colleague who attended a writing workshop." Still another said that the staff "give me the stimulus I need. They're curriculum-based and have patents on presenting the best workshops. If I ever stopped interacting with them, I know I would suffer terribly, and so would my students."

Hearing this kind of praise for an administrative office and seeing the extent to which teachers were using, with good results, ideas they garnered from district activities impelled us to study not only exemplary Dade County teachers but also the Division of Language Arts/Reading itself. One field researcher spent a year studying the office and interviewing staff members, which resulted in a case study entitled *Interactions between Central Office Language Arts Administrators and Exemplary English Teachers, and the Impact on Student Performance*. In addition, we asked Sallie Snyder, one of the six instructional supervisors in the Division of Language Arts/Reading, to write this paper, which gives her perspective on the part the office plays in supporting language arts/reading teachers and their students.

Overall, the programs we are studying represent great diversity in student populations, educational problems, and approaches to improvement. The reports and case studies that come out of this project (listed below) together provide a conception of what "English" is as it is enacted in the classrooms of our best teachers, how these teachers have reconciled the various voices and trends within the professional community in their own practices, how their schools and districts support and encourage their efforts, and how in turn the contexts they create in their classrooms shape the high literacy learning of their students. The results have implications for curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as well as policy decisions, in English and the language arts.

For my first cross-cutting report, *Excellence in English in Middle and High School: How Teachers' Professional Lives Support Student Achievement* (CELA Report #12002), I analyzed the data across all case studies for overarching patterns. In it, I identify and discuss particular features of teachers' professional experiences that permeate these special programs.

I am profoundly grateful for the cooperation and vision of the teachers and administrators who contributed their time and ideas so generously and so graciously to this project. It was indeed a privilege for the field researchers and me to enter into their worlds of learning. I am especially grateful to Sallie for sharing insights from her perspective as a highly motivated central office administrator.

Judith A. Langer
Director, CELA
May 1999

RELATED REPORTS AND CASE STUDIES FROM THE EXCELLENCE IN ENGLISH RESEARCH PROJECT

12002 *Excellence in English in Middle and High School: How Teachers' Professional Lives Support Student Achievement.* Judith A. Langer.

The following site-specific case studies profile teachers, teams of teachers, and central office administrators. These and others will be available beginning in spring 1999.

12003 *Interactions between Central Office Language Arts Administrators and Exemplary English Teachers, and the Impact on Student Performance.* Carla Confer.

12005 *A Middle School Teacher Never Stops Learning: The Case of Cathy Starr.* Eija Rougle.

12006 *Teacher of the Year Engages Agriscience Students in English Language Arts Learning: The Case of Janas Masztal.* Steven Ostrowski.

12008 *Collegial Support and Networks Invigorate Teaching: The Case of Marsha S. Slater.* Ester Helmar-Salasoo with Sally Kahr.

12009 *Forging Connections to Advance Literacy in the Middle School: The Case of Rita Gold.* Steven Ostrowski.

12010 *Interdisciplinary Cluster as Professional Network: Three Middle School Teachers in a Two-Way Bilingual Program.* Gladys Cruz.

For an up-to-date listing and current availability, visit the CELA website: http://cela.albany.edu or call 518-442-5023.

BEATING THE ODDS OVER TIME: ONE DISTRICT'S PERSPECTIVE

SALLIE SNYDER
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When you step into Shawn DeNight's tenth grade classroom, you are likely to see writing of all types – essays, poems, stories, some accompanied by graphics – taped to much of the available wall space. Working in small groups, taking notes, writing at computers, reading from books, or listening with rapt attention to their animated teacher, students are focused on learning. Shawn himself is serving as salesman and advisor, helping students to understand the subject matter under consideration, to believe in the importance and value of what they are doing, and to believe in themselves as learners and thinkers. And this classroom is located not in the upper reaches of suburbia but in the core of the urban inner city in a high school that is 99% minority, with nearly one-fourth enrolled in English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) classes. In fact, Shawn's school is in one of the largest school systems in the United States, one that includes 202 elementary, 49 middle, and 31 senior high schools, with a total student enrollment in 1997-98 of 345,861, of whom 87% are students from minority groups.

How much of Shawn DeNight's teaching happens because he is who he is – intelligent, dedicated, tireless, enthusiastic, committed to excellence – and how much emanates from what might be termed the "school district" perspective? And if the district, i.e., the staff in the Division of Language Arts/Reading, can lay claim to any of DeNight's achievements, what might they be? The truth is that DeNight is a unique and gifted teacher, one who in any setting would find a way to triumph over the odds; however, it can also be said and, in fact, he would say it himself, that the support and guidance he has received from a variety of resources provided by the Division of Language Arts/Reading have, over the years, transformed him as a teacher.

When DeNight started his career, he tended to teach skills in isolation and became frustrated with students' superficial understandings. After our office developed a new competency-based curriculum (developed by exemplary teachers in the district) and after attending the district's annual two-week Writing Institute, DeNight began teaching skills within the context of

strategically designed projects. He also involved students in constant writing and peer editing. His frustration turned to satisfaction as he began to see the growing understandings and competencies of his students. As he said to a researcher recently: "When a good idea starts in the Division of Language Arts, it really does trickle down into the classrooms and into the experiences of our students."

What the support provided by the Division of Language Arts/Reading looks like and how it has evolved over time seem to fall largely into four areas: 1) the structure of the Division of Language Arts/Reading, 2) the basic philosophy that underpins what happens in the division, 3) ways in which division staff stay on the cutting edge of language arts instruction, and 4) the process by which staff development and curriculum materials are developed and delivered.

DIVISION OF LANGUAGE ARTS/READING

As a secondary supervisor in the Division of Language Arts/Reading, it has been my great pleasure for the last several years to work with a group of people whom I believe to be exceptional teachers who, because of their titles, happen now to be called administrators. This group includes two other secondary supervisors, three elementary supervisors, and Norma Bossard, the current division director. The former director, Zelda Glazer, set the standard for the work we do today. All of us came from classrooms in our district; all have attended the district's Writing Institute; and all play extremely similar roles. The vast majority of our time is spent in two areas: teacher training and curriculum development. Of course we also attend meetings, write memos, return phone calls, juggle calendars, and manage a variety of programs.

In addition to the seven of us, for the last several years we have also had an educational specialist (teacher on special assignment) who has worked directly with elementary schools to improve writing in those schools whose test scores have been low. She spends 90% of her time doing classroom demonstrations followed by teacher training at school sites. For the last two years two educational specialists have worked directly with eight middle schools on a Reciprocal Teaching grant. They spend 90% of their time either in classrooms or working with teachers. These teacher/specialists also have many years of teaching experience in the district and have participated in our Writing Institute.

Basic Philosophy

We have written guiding principles that shape our thinking about what language arts/reading instruction entails and encompasses (see Appendix). We also share a basic philosophy that informs virtually all actions in our division. This philosophy has developed from successful practice and strong, ongoing, and humane leadership. We are driven by the belief that we cannot be an ivory tower group, that we must be closely connected to real classroom practice, and that our job is to be available for and meet the needs of classroom teachers. No layers exist between classroom teachers and Division of Language Arts/Reading staff. Further, we see ourselves as far more closely aligned to teachers than to the several layers of bureaucracy above us.

Additionally, over the years, the lines between elementary and secondary supervision and between the curricular areas of reading and language arts have blurred considerably, and all supervisors now work in both elementary and secondary arenas as well as in both reading and language arts. All of us are well grounded in classroom practice, with each of us having between 20 and 25 years of wide-ranging teaching experience. After so many years, it is all but impossible to lose the ability to look at an issue or a problem from the teacher's point of view or consider a task without students in mind.

Secondly, only minimal distance exists between our division and the teachers; in fact, we continue to see ourselves as teachers (and learners). Several years ago, when one of my colleagues left a job as assistant principal to become a language arts supervisor, the first thing she did was to ask to come in late for six weeks so she could teach a first period, two-hour summer school English class. In addition, it is common to find supervisors doing classroom demonstrations, meeting with small groups of teachers, and sitting down with students to stay connected to the world of classrooms and classroom practice. The goal of the division is to support classroom teachers, to anticipate their needs, to ask, "How can I help you?"

When a new senior high school opened recently, the language arts department chair at the school called a supervisor and asked for help. She wanted the supervisor to meet the members of the department, share with them one "best practice" strategy, and review all curriculum and test-taking materials. In addition, she wanted copies of all available district materials for her staff. All of this the supervisor gladly did, knowing the importance of being available and helpful to even the smallest groups of teachers. In fact, all of us realize that the best way to establish

relationships with teachers, discover what is working in schools, build the kind of trust that is crucial to effectiveness as a supervisor, address problems one-on-one, and meet new teachers is in small settings such as this one.

We find ourselves continually reflecting and revising, aware that in teaching you are never "there," but are continually trying to find more successful ways to reach students. We look at what is working and what is needed and ask, "What else needs to be done?" Over the years, this attitude has meant a considerable amount of risk-taking and experimentation, the kind that good teachers are always willing to try. If one of us reads about a new research-based practice and thinks it might work with our students, she will try it out with a small group of students, figure out how to present it most effectively to teachers, share it with colleagues for feedback and revision, and finally, share it with teachers.

An example of this took place a few years ago when the director of the division read about Reciprocal Teaching and its effect on students with poor reading ability. She tried it with several classes and saw its potential, especially with middle school students. She also felt that there was a missing component – what we have come to call "visioning," or making a mental picture of what you are reading. The director applied for and received a small grant to fund two educational specialists to work with middle school teachers and students in implementing this Reciprocal Teaching model. As a result, statistical gains have been shown in reading test scores in many of the schools involved. This would not have happened had the director not been willing to take the risk that this program could make a difference for students.

Finally, we all share an abiding belief that teachers are professionals gifted in their art, knowledgeable, willing to grow, and worthy of great respect and admiration. We make sure teachers know how valued they are. We call on them constantly, as the classroom experts, to help us plan and write curriculum and to share best practices. We also take extra effort to make them feel special. Sometimes this means contacting an individual when we read an article or know of an opportunity that relates to his or her specific needs and interests. Sometimes it simply means bringing to a workshop something – cookies, fruit, flowers, pencils – specially for the teachers.

KEEPING UP WITH THE FIELD

For the Division of Language Arts/Reading staff, the matter of keeping up with – and even being ahead of – the field happens in a number of ways. As with language arts and reading teachers and administrators everywhere, attending local, state, and national conferences, participating in professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), International Reading Association (IRA), and Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) and reading their excellent professional journals certainly play important roles. Semi-annual state supervisors' meetings also have significance as they provide valuable information from other supervisors and from State Department of Education staff.

Additionally, among the district language arts/reading supervisors, the almost daily sharing of key articles, new ideas, and successful, innovative classroom practice provides the constant wellspring that isolated meetings and conferences by their very nature cannot. We spend a majority of our time out of the office and in the schools. Fridays, however, we are all asked to be in the office so that we can formally meet, discuss, and plan together. On a typical Friday, our director may ask all of us to meet to share what we have been working on, and we may find in our mailboxes copies of two or three articles that colleagues have found provocative and want to share. The other secondary supervisors and I will spend an hour or two planning a department chairs meeting or a districtwide inservice event, set calendar dates, compare classroom observation notes, and discuss and revise new curriculum materials. A supervisor who has returned from a state meeting will update other supervisors on the latest information and policy. All of this is sandwiched between the usual administrative tasks such as answering phone calls, making sure materials have been copied, writing memos, and reading mail.

Many of us have also been invited to serve on state and national committees and/or participate in national projects. Examples of such committees include various state writing and reading assessment test committees. One supervisor spent several days each month for nearly a year working as a member of the state language arts/reading curriculum revision committee. This committee included university professors; elementary and secondary language arts, ESOL, and reading teachers or supervisors from throughout the state; the state language arts supervisor, and one or two other members of the State Department of Education staff. The group began with a vision statement and worked through to the development of standards, benchmarks, and

examples of classroom practice. In this case, membership provided a wealth of information to be taken back to the district and allowed us to help determine on the state level what we believe is important for students to know and be able to do.

Another supervisor became a part of a national reading project several years ago; since then, all supervisors and several teachers have become trainers in the same reading project. Participation in ways such as these give both the director and the supervisors valuable experience and insight that translates into new curriculum, ideas for staff development, conversations that produce more effective ways of helping teachers and students, and, ultimately, better results.

What makes our practice unique, however, is the existence of our Writing Institute, which began in 1984. Over the past fifteen years more than 2000 teachers have had the opportunity to spend two weeks in what most call a life-changing experience. Teachers apply to attend, receive no pay, but may, if they choose, earn three university graduate credits. Unlike other institutes throughout the country which build, for the most part, on the knowledge and expertise of teachers who attend, it has been our practice to bring presenters to the institute from throughout the United States, with a facilitator (who also does presentations) serving to weave everything together into a cohesive whole. Over the years presenters have included Arthur Applebee, Sheridan Blau, Rebeccah Caplan, Fran Claggett, Roger Farr, Helen Hollingsworth, Alice Kawazoe, Dan Kirby, Judith Langer, James Moffett, Miles Myers, and Marian Toth. This constellation of stars in the language arts firmament has meant that not only teachers but also those of us who serve as facilitators – and all elementary and secondary supervisors do – have an opportunity each year to hear the latest thinking across the country, observe and practice the most cutting edge art, and use what we learn to inform and change our own practice and plans for the coming year.

The Writing Institute has also provided the leaders who are currently in place in the Division of Language Arts/Reading. The current director and all three secondary supervisors were people who stood out at the institute. This is true for other teachers who are called upon to write curriculum or do staff development. They were noticed at the Institute by their facilitators as exceptional teachers and were later invited to become involved in other district activities. Thus the Writing Institute not only enables us to help strengthen thousands of teachers' writing and instruction, but it provides an opportunity for us to become better acquainted with teachers and identify and support teacher leaders. We now have 50 exemplary teachers, whom we call

"Institute Associates," and the group grows each year. We draw from this large pool of teacher talent when we develop curriculum and deliver inservice instruction.

All of these experiences translate almost immediately into thinking about what will work for our students. How can we take what we have learned from articles, meetings, committee membership, classroom practice, the Writing Institute, and our own sense of what will work, and make it accessible to teachers?

Sharing Best Practices

The process by which curriculum materials and staff development are created and delivered grows out of both the language arts/reading philosophy and efforts to stay on the cutting edge of language arts/reading instruction. It also stems from state and district required assessments in reading and writing and, as in many districts, with efforts to continually raise test scores.

As mentioned above, we bring in experienced, talented teachers from our schools to help write and rewrite curriculum. When we recently needed to develop curriculum material for the new state reading assessment test, we called upon six middle and six high school teachers to work in two teams during the summer. Prior to the first meeting of the teams, the two supervisors heading the project met to give careful consideration to the selection of the teachers who would be part of each team. In this case, they were most interested in building on the strengths of teachers who had previously written curriculum for the Division of Language Arts/Reading while also incorporating a few new teachers, all of whom needed to be comfortable with technology. In addition, they discussed how they saw the project developing, including where teachers could meet, informational and technological resources teachers would need, and the product they thought they wanted to have at the end of about five weeks of work. The supervisors know it is of great value to begin a project such as this with some structure rather than throwing everything open to the group, yet both are willing to improve on their own design, listen to what the teacher teams have to say, and yield to the will and expertise of the group.

On a typical day part way through the project, the high school group is critiquing some of their work. Having divided the tasks according to their respective strengths, it is time to review what has been accomplished over the last few days. The supervisor is there as well, though once

the teams have begun and the plan is in place, the supervisors are there less frequently than at the beginning, when they serve to facilitate the discussion and decision-making process. Having picked the teachers and gotten the project started, both supervisors trust the work of the teachers enough so they can say, "You don't need me. You are the experts." Of course, the supervisors review work, serve as editors, and recommend changes. In fact, one strength these supervisors bring to the task is their ability to judge what will "fly" with teachers, whether what is written will be clear to other teachers, whether teachers will say, "I can do that!" Finally, they assess whether they feel the material will achieve the goals of the project which, in this case, is to help prepare students for the state reading test.

In the middle of the morning, a visitor arrives. She is a teacher serving as a member of the state assessment committee who has agreed to share what she knows that is not confidential that might help strengthen the project. The team takes notes, asks questions, confirms information, and uses what they learn to improve the curriculum material they are creating. In the afternoon, the middle and high school groups meet, and the high school teachers share what they have learned with the middle school writing team.

This curriculum, along with other information and hands-on staff development, will form the basis of day-long inservice sessions with middle and high school teachers throughout the year. Nor will the material created by these teams remain static. As new information is gathered, the material will be revised and expanded; over the years, new documents will be developed that support the first document. Teachers who share their expertise and ideas will be given opportunities to incorporate what they have learned into other materials until a body of several resources will exist that are interrelated and comprehensive.

Largely because of this evolutionary process, the quality of the vast majority of the material that has been developed by the Division of Language Arts/Reading has been so high that teachers have come to trust the work of the division. They know that if they use the material, it will strengthen their teaching, improve students' ability to learn, help them prepare students for tests, and yield better results.

Curriculum writing is one of the ways we share best practices, but if it is not linked to staff development, the power of even the best curriculum is diminished. As a result, supervisors spend the vast majority of their time delivering hands-on inservice to groups of teachers in a variety of settings, including regular department chairs meetings, and frequent district, region, and school-

site staff development on a variety of topics. Session length ranges from as little as an hour to as long as a week. The purposes also vary widely: these include orientation for new teachers, schoolwide training for reading or writing across the curriculum, individual support for teachers needing special help, practice in using new curriculum materials, introduction of new programs or strategies, work with teachers in a specific content area, and administrators' seminars in effective classroom practice.

The preparation for presentations, unlike the presentations themselves, takes days and days of planning and thinking. The goal of all staff development given by the Division of Language Arts/Reading is to make it so sensible, practical, logical and "doable" that at the end of a workshop session, teachers will say, "I think this will work with my students, I think it will make a difference, and I think I can do it!" Are we always successful in this? Of course not. But that is our goal, and it forces us to revisit, rethink, and revise constantly.

A typical day-long department chairs meeting will include two two-hour inservices on a strategy such as Reciprocal Teaching or effective ways to use reader response logs, teacher discussion about effective technology in their schools, no more than 30 minutes for announcements, and time for middle and high teachers to articulate issues of concern or share what is working in their schools.

As with curriculum writing projects, planning for staff development frequently includes teachers. Week-long Best Practices in Secondary Reading seminars include presentations by teachers on topics such as highlighting and marginal note-taking, literature circles, and vocabulary strategies. Because these teacher-presenters have worked with us and watched us over time, and because virtually all of them have attended the Writing Institute, they know that anything they present must actively engage teachers in what they are learning – not a discussion of highlighting and marginal note-taking, but giving teachers a passage and taking them through the steps of highlighting as if they were students (which, in fact, they are). Overlaid on this is "teacher talk" so teachers can process the information in two ways simultaneously – both in terms of what it feels like to be a student and in terms of how to manage this in their classroom as the instructor.

Involving teachers as presenters develops their own teaching skills and their confidence as presenters. This close work with the supervisors allows for a continuity in the belief in and support for the philosophy discussed earlier that underpins the Division of Language Arts/

Reading. Finally, it provides a wonderful, rich resource from which the Division can draw when the need arises to replace a supervisor, or add new positions.

A Day in the Life of a Supervisor

It is 7:30 a.m. and I am sitting in the office of the assistant principal of curriculum in one of our large middle schools. He has asked for help with preparing for writing assessment, and we have decided to do several things: provide ongoing staff development on general writing strategies across the curriculum; provide a full day of training in specifics related to what teachers can do to prepare students for the state writing assessment; spend additional time with language arts teachers in "advanced training" techniques; and walk through classrooms to get an informal sense of what is working, what teachers need additional help with, and how much writing instruction is actually going on. This morning, after a brief meeting with him, I will work with all of the language arts teachers in two groups for two hours each. This allows for fewer substitutes than if all language arts teachers were out at the same time, and still gives me enough time to present two ideas fully.

After the teachers are in and settled and introductions are over, I remind them that at our last session, they specifically mentioned their students' inability to provide strong support for their ideas in writing. Thus, the goal for this session is to consider strategies to develop supporting ideas in an organized manner. Because the remainder of the time is spent in sharing the strategies and having teachers try them out themselves, the time goes by quickly. Too soon, only a few minutes remain for discussion of teachers' concerns and comments about what is needed in other sessions. The second two-hour session passes equally quickly. I gather up my box of materials, and, after saying good-by to the assistant principal, head for a meeting at the district office.

I slide into my chair just as the school-to-work meeting commences. Present are supervisors and other staff members from a variety of disciplines as well as the school-to- work office. Our focus is the ways in which we can provide district support for the infusion of school-to-work goals into the regular curriculum. My task is to provide support for language arts teachers in schools that are implementing school-to-work programs for the first time. In the end, I agree to chair a small team of language arts teachers who will create a slim volume of ideas that build on

the existing language arts curriculum. Because language arts teachers are already burdened with state requirements and tests, I am not willing to suggest that they add anything additional to their curriculum; rather, we will consider some ways the ideas and values promoted in various work force documents might be infused into discussions about literature. In addition, we will suggest writing assignments that might align themselves with those required in the workplace, such as analytical reports, resumes, persuasive requests.

After the meeting, two hours remain before I have a 2:45 planning meeting at a high school. During this time I eat lunch, answer and initiate a number of phone calls, write the first draft of the agenda for an upcoming department chairs meeting, meet with one of my colleagues (the only one who is in the office at the moment) and ask her to proofread a report I have just completed, discuss with her revisions to the agenda, and take some time to say hello to anyone else who may be in the office, including the director, whom, I regret to say, I see too rarely.

As I leave for the high school, I grab a folder for Shawn DeNight, since my meeting is at his school. Once there, I work with two language arts and one math teacher who have applied for and received a grant to implement a Saturday "lab school" for students who are in danger of failing the test they must pass in order to receive a regular high school diploma. Their intent is to bring in outside "master teachers" from other schools who have been successful in raising test scores. These teachers will teach the Saturday classes while their own teachers observe and then implement the same strategies the following week. They want suggestions on ways to develop the school, whom to hire as teachers, and how to allocate the money and time most effectively.

At the end of the meeting I walk down the hall to Shawn DeNight's classroom. Although the regular school day has long ago ended, Shawn teaches an after-school class, and I need to speak with him about a project in which we are both involved. I find him and several students in the room, some because they have to be there, and some because his is a room with computers and they know he is happy to have them come in after school to write reports, work on projects, even play computer games.

Because Shawn's first priority is always his students, I wait for him to make himself available for conversation. While I am waiting, I walk around the classroom to see what students are writing. I ask one young man (who Shawn later tells me is a special education student) to tell me what he thinks of Mr. DeNight. His response: "We went on a field trip and he let me use his camera – which most people wouldn't do. He's a good teacher, but more importantly, he's like a

friend." When Shawn is finally free to talk, at the end of our conversation, I ask him how he feels about his work. He tells me he still loves what he does, remains enthusiastic about teaching, wants to stay in the classroom, and is undaunted by the challenges he faces each day. "I'm decidedly optimistic," he proclaims without hesitation.

Driving home, I say a silent prayer of gratitude for Shawn and all those like him who remind me constantly of where the important work really is and how critical it is for teachers to receive all the help and support we can give them.

A Final Word

And that, I think, is what enables us in the Division of Language Arts/Reading to achieve the success we do: a kind of jealous awareness that the classroom is "where it's at." It is the point of it all, the reason we work. No one is more important than the classroom teacher. Our job is to nourish and support them.

Coupled with this is our certainty that the English language arts represent a profound curriculum. Driven by literature, the language arts move students to an understanding of how the world works and how they can find their place in it, both in terms of what they are able to do, and in terms of who they are and can become.

Chris Kirchner, who teaches in the Finance Academy of one of our inner city high schools tells her students that "You learn everything you need to know about every kind of person that you're ever likely to deal with in business by reading novels." Her students read a great deal and engage in many meaningful discussions about the literature they read. During one such discussion of Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, a student said that he learned from it that "sometimes, in order to get what you need to get done, you need to go it alone." The insights that students gain from their encounters with literature in our schools – from the silent reading they do during "Sustained Silent Reading," the small group "literature circle" discussions they regularly engage in, to the "Grand Conversations" that up to 60 Highland Oaks Middle School students attend several times a year at the local Borders Book Store – are great, ongoing, and powerful.

It is my strong belief that neither as a district nor as individual supervisors are we unique. I believe that what we do, everyone does. In districts throughout the United States there are

teachers, supervisors, and other administrators who experience the same successes and failures we do each day, who struggle with the same issues, who try to solve the same problems, who use the same processes we do. The tasks are daunting, the failures are many, the days are long, the process is one of trial and error. What may be different about Dade County is the way we all work together. Our goal is always to emerge on the plus side and to share with others what seems to work in the hope that it will work for them as well. In the end, we all hope for teachers like Shawn who regardless of the obstacles and difficulties remain "decidedly optimistic." It is their zeal and commitment that fuels the fire of learning and that, in the end, will assure that all students have an opportunity for a quality education.

Please help us assess the quality of our research report series by completing and returning the questionnaire below:

NAME OF CASE STUDY: **BEATING THE ODDS: ONE DISTRICT'S PERSPECTIVE**

1. Your position:

____ elementary school teacher	___ state ed. agency staff	___ policy maker
____ middle school teacher	___ professional developer	___ researcher
____ high school teacher	___ school administrator	___ education writer
____ college teacher/professor	___ district administrator	other_____

2. Clarity

	Very well				Not at all	
a. The concepts in this report were clearly expressed.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
b. This report was well organized.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

3. Utility

a. Reading this report gave me new information or insight into teaching or learning.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
b. This report helps the reader understand a current and important problem in education from a different perspective	1	2	3	4	5	N/A
c. I found the ideas offered in this report to be feasible given current realities of policy and practice.	1	2	3	4	5	N/A

4. Any other comments or suggestions regarding this report or additional research needs in the area of English and language arts teaching and learning are greatly appreciated.

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